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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

CLASSICAL ART

LATE GREEK ROOM

SCULPTURE

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Late Greek Room:
Sculpture

Department of Classical Art
Gallery Guide no. 4

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CLASSICAL ART.

Late Greek Room.

Sculpture.

(The following descriptions begin beside the doorway leading to the Fourth Century Room).

East Wall.

Bronze portrait head of a girl. Hellenistic Greek.

In the fourth century B. C., Greek art in all its phases expressed with constantly increasing readiness the personal and individual aspects of human life. One result of this tendency was the development of portraiture in marble and bronze. The idealized portraits of Alexander and the imaginary representations of men famous in earlier times were succeeded during the course of the Hellenistic age by more realistic types, until the art culminated in the incomparable character studies produced during the Graeco-Roman period.

This head of a girl, broken from a bronze statue, shows the idealization usual in portraits made about the beginning of the third century B. C. The subject has not been identified with certainty, but bears a slight resemblance to Arsinoë II., daughter of Ptolemy I., and the fact that the head is reported to have been found in Egypt, at or near the site of Memphis, strengthens the probability that the person represented was a member of the royal Ptolemaic house. The eyes were inserted, and a thin coating of another metal or of enamel originally covered the lips.

Portrait head of a man.

The face is that of an elderly man with a restless, energetic nature, great determination and unyielding firmness of will. He is smooth-shaven and has short, thick, curling hair which was colored yellow, a low forehead, small eyes deeply shadowed by the brow, thin, straight lips, unusually large ears, and a somewhat emaciated face and neck covered with skin of a peculiar, leathery texture. The liveliness and vigor of the work suggest the best traditions of Hellenistic portraiture, but certain technical details, such as the treatment of the hair, the incision of the pupils of the eyes and the polished surface are characteristic of the second century A. D.

Relief: Mithras slaying the bull.

This belongs to the common type of Mithraic reliefs, representing Mithras slaying the bull, but is distinguished by the superior quality of its workmanship. Mithras, dressed in Oriental costume, leaps from behind upon the fallen victim, the head of which he pulls back by the muzzle while he plunges a sword into its throat. A snake and a dog lift their heads to drink the bull's blood.

Mithras was a Persian divinity whose worship, practiced in Asia Minor from early times, spread throughout the Roman Empire during the first century A. D. The sacrifice of the bull, represented so frequently on reliefs, symbolizes the creation of life; this animal, which was consecrated to Aphrodite in her Oriental aspect as goddess of generation and fecundity, possessed a vital principle which flowed out with his blood to fertilize the earth.

The following nine small marble heads and a statuette of Aphrodite are exhibited together in a case on the east wall.

1. Head of an infant satyr. Graeco-Roman.

A wreath of ivy leaves and berries encircles the head. Tears seem ready to start from the eyes of the sad, baby face.

2. Head of an infant satyr. Graeco-Roman.

In style and execution this head resembles the preceding, but the expression is smiling and joyous.

3. Portrait bust of a Roman. Graeco-Roman.

In spite of its small size this head is an unusually realistic and individualized portrait in the style of the middle of the first century A. D. The face is of oval shape with lean cheeks, prominent cheek-bones, aquiline nose and straight, firm mouth.

4. Statuette of Aphrodite untying her sandal. Graeco-Roman.

She is nude except for a himation, traces of which appear on the left shoulder and on the right

thigh. The attitude is similar to that of the terra-cotta statuette exhibited in a separate case in the center of the room. Graeco-Roman work in palombino, a hard, close-grained limestone in use during the first century B. C.

5. Head of a barbarian. Hellenistic Greek.

The high, pointed skull covered with a mass of coarse and disordered hair, the sunken cheeks and protruding lips and the narrow, sinister eyes deeply set at the inner corners, give this head almost the character of a portrait. It is a study of one of the barbarous types with which Greek sculptors became familiar as a result of the foreign campaigns of the Hellenistic age.

6. Small head. Graeco-Roman.

The head is probably from the figure of a Maenad or a Hermaphrodite who was grouped with a satyr; the left hand preserved at the back of the head is placed in such a way that it must have belonged to a second figure. The hair is carved in great detail, and the modelling of the hand and of the parts about the mouth is unusually delicate. The work dates from the first century B. C.

7. Male portrait head. Graeco-Roman.

8. Head of Athena. Graeco-Roman.

She wears a crested helmet of the Attic type, wreathed with a heavy garland of leaves and flowers. The pupils of the eyes are indicated by round, drilled holes. It is evident from the poise of the head and from the determined expression of the mouth that the figure was engaged in intense action.

9. Female head. Greek.

This head is of a familiar fourth century type, with oval features and with the hair carried back in wavy masses from the low forehead and gathered into a small knot on the crown. The skull is unusually high and rounded.

10. Head of a girl. Greek.

Given in memory of Miss Mary Conway Felton.

The face is long and oval with delicately modelled features. The hair is drawn up from the forehead to the top of the head, where it is confined in a knot as on the heads of the so-called Hygieia type at Athens. The head is Attic work of the fourth century B. C., carved from unusually fine, translucent marble.

North Wall.

Portrait heads of Ptolemy IV. and of his Queen, Arsinoë III. Hellenistic Greek.

These heads, like many others of Hellenistic date found in Egypt, were made partly of marble and partly of plaster.

The youthful face of Ptolemy IV., Philopator, (221-204 B. C.) is indicative of a soft and self-indulgent nature; though broad and full in the upper part, it narrows down to a small, weak, pointed chin. The mouth is also small with full lips. The royal diadem appears, carved in marble, around the back of the head; its continuation in front of the ears was originally added in plaster. In the lower part of the face are eight holes drilled, apparently, for the purpose of attaching a beard. The careful finish of the surface here indicates that the beard was either a later addition, or was intended to be removable and to be used only on special occasions.

The face of Arsinoë III. shows a family resemblance to that of her brother and husband, but is more oval in outline and of greater refinement and moral strength.

The royal diadem, the Egyptian origin of the two heads and the fact that they are a pair, make it certain that they represent one of the Ptolemies and his wife; and the identification is made certain by the strong resemblance which they bear to the coins of Ptolemy IV. and Arsinoë III.

Two torsos of Marsyas. Graeco-Roman.

These are replicas of the well-known representation of the Satyr Marsyas suspended from a tree and about to be flayed alive as a punishment for having challenged Apollo to a musical contest. The original,

a statue of life size, probably formed a part of a group including a seated Apollo and the crouching figure of a Scythian slave whetting his knife, a copy of which - the so-called Arrotino - is preserved in Florence. The group is assigned to the school of sculpture which flourished at Pergamon during the reign of Attalus I. (241-197 B. C.). The figure of Marsyas was especially popular in Roman times and exists in numerous copies. The variations apparent in these two replicas are to be ascribed to the copyists; the larger statuette was probably the more faithful reproduction of the original.

Head of Zeus Ammon. Graeco-Roman.

The work is a careful but mechanical copy executed in Roman times of a type which dates from the second half of the fifth century B. C. It has been suggested that the original may have stood at Cyrene, where this hellenized form of an Egyptian divinity was especially worshipped. The face is mild, without any trace of the animal nature which appears in some representations of Ammon. The ram's horns starting from above the temples grew downward at the sides of the head and curved around the ears, which were made separately, evidently in the form of ram's ears.

West Wall.

Part of a decorative relief. Greek.

This fragmentary slab of soft white limestone on which is carved a floral arabesque in relief may have come from the pediment of a small building, as the sloping line of the preserved original upper surface indicates. The design has no close parallel in Greek sculpture, but corresponds closely to the floral motives decorating the necks of large Apulian amphorae dating from the fourth century B. C., and the relief itself was found near Bari in Southern Italy in the region anciently called Apulia. (Compare the Apulian amphora in the Fourth Century Room, north wall). Both the composition and the carving are unusually fresh and vigorous; the design consists of a large acanthus plant from which spring thick fluted stalks with blossoms, leaves and curling tendrils covering the field. In the midst of the

foliage appear the fore-part of a griffin and the figure of Eros represented as a full-grown youth in a manner characteristic of fourth century art.

Portrait bust of a Roman. Terra-cotta. Roman.

In a separate case. (Included here because of its relation to Roman portrait-sculpture).

The detailed realism and extraordinarily living appearance of the face are due in part to the fact that the portrait was made with the use of a life mask. The work dates from the first century B. C. and represents an unknown man, past middle age, whose character is a combination of force, intelligence and refinement. The pose of the head, the high, broad forehead, the keen and vivid glance of the eyes, the fine, aquiline nose with long, thin nostrils, the firm yet sensitive mouth and the square jaw indicate the aristocratic and commanding qualities of the man's nature. The scar of a large wound appears above the left temple. Heads of life size in terra-cotta are extremely rare, and this portrait is probably unique.